Art Seen: Lesley Dill's visions in text and textile

By Edgar Allen Beem - January 12, 2022



Lesley Dill grew up in Cumberland Foreside and attended Waynflete School in Portland. She now lives in Brooklyn, New York, but says Maine is where she became "a person of thoughtfulness." (Courtesy Ed Robbins)



s a teenager, artist Lesley Dill had a vision that influenced the rest of her life and art. It was an experience of the unity of all life that often visits sensitive souls.

"When I was 14," Dill recalled, "I woke up one day and looked out my bedroom window. The oak leaves hadn't fallen from the trees. Suddenly my screen went black and I felt a swoon, not a fainting, just an 'Oh!' My mental eye filled with strands of light. I was given to see murder and defilement along with beauty and grace and I understood them."

This experience, akin to rapture, occurred while Dill was a student at Waynflete School in Portland and lived in Cumberland Foreside. Her father taught at Freeport High School and her mother at Waynflete. The vision soon vanished; Dill was a 20-year-old student at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, before it came back to her.

"It just blossomed within me and has stayed alive forever," she said.



"Omnipotence Enough (Emily Dickinson)," by Lesley Dill, 2017 oil paint on fabric, wooden yoke and shoe lasts 103.25 x 42.5 x 5 inches. (Courtesy Bates College Museum of Art)

That vision of the hidden wholeness of life is the subtext of Lesley Dill's traveling exhibition, "Wilderness: Light Sizzles Around Me," which will be at the Bates College Museum of Art in Lewiston from Jan. 28-March 26.

The exhibit was organized by the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa, and has stops at Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in Alabama; Bates; Canterbury Shaker Village in New Hampshire; Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, New York, and the Bernard A. Zuckerman Museum of Art at Kennesaw State University in Georgia.

Dill, who lives in Brooklyn, New York, is internationally known for works of art that integrate words and images. Her "Wilderness" show features "portraits" of 16 American visionaries in the form of 8-foot hanging costumes covered in the words of the subjects.

Dill's cast of visionary characters are Puritan spiritual leader Anne Hutchinson; Colonial writer Mary Rowlandson, who wrote one of the first captivity narratives; Colonial poet-preacher Edward Taylor; Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards; Shaker founder Mother Ann Lee; Sauk warrior Chief Black Hawk; abolitionist and women's rights advocate Sojourner Truth; freedom

fighter Dred Scott; abolitionist John Brown; author Nathaniel Hawthorne and his character Hester Prynne; poets Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, and early-American visionary artists Horace Pippin and Sister Gertrude Morgan.

"In her unique way," Figge Art Museum curator Andrew Wallace wrote in his catalog essay, "Dill has created a portrait gallery of effigies – seers, artists, visionaries, and icons – whose emphatic words and creative actions are revivified in her



"Dred Scott," by Lesley Dill, 2021 acrylic paint on cotton fabric, 100 x 60 inches. (Courtesy Bates College Museum of Art)

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith.

work."

The suspended costumes are accompanied by drawings and banners. Only Black Hawk and Scott are not represented by figures, just drawings.

Dill's muse has long been Dickinson, whose poetry and person have been the source of her inspiration and the subject of much of her art over the years. What Dill realized a few years ago, however, is that she "didn't connect her poetry with the history of what was happening when she wrote it. Her poetry was a country of its own. But Dickinson was writing during the Civil War"

That realization led Dill to seek the historical narrative her subjects belong to and is the reason for the strong African-American, Native American and feminist strain that the show developed. White artists appropriating Black and Native American history can be a touchy subject, but Dill was urged to do so by Black artist Dread Scott (aka Scott Tyler) and Native American artist

"Thus, I reached out to the nation that Black Hawk is from because he wrote an autobiography," Dill said. "All the characters are linked by writings. Black Hawk is from the Sac & Fox Nation of Oklahoma. And I asked for permission to do an image of Black Hawk from Juaquin Hamilton Young-Bird, cultural historian."

Dill's art has taken the form of dresses and clothing for many years. She credits a pair of great-aunts for introducing her to the needle arts.

"They taught me how to weave at 11, giving me my first 'touch' of thread, which has remained magical to me to this day," she said, "and how to hook rugs, and how to carve a linoleum block for printmaking."

"Black Hawk," by Lesley Dill, 2021 hand-cut paper and acrylic paint on cotton fabric, 100 x 60 inches. (Courtesy Bates College Museum of Art)

Despite the fact that Dill grew up in Maine, her only other Maine exhibition was a show at the Portland Museum of Art in 1999.

"I would love to be more visible in Maine and I'll tell you why," Dill told me several years ago. "I grew up in Maine. That's the land I became a person of thoughtfulness in. I actually think that it's an under-recognized factor where an artist grows up. The geography, the culture, the background – all of the things that go unknowingly into an artist's being."

More recently, she said "Growing up with the austere beauty of Maine, I have a history of quietness. Part of me is total Maine."

Edgar Allen Beem has written about art in Maine since 1978.



"Wilderness: Light Sizzles Around Me," Jan. 28-March 26, Bates College Museum of Art, 75 Russell St., Lewiston, 207-786-6158, bates.edu/museum/. The museum is currently only open to visitors with valid Bates IDs due to the emergence of the omicron variant; check the website for updates to visitor protocols.